

Indian Rose Annual - IRA 2013

Sustainable Rose Growing - An Indian Dream

M.S. Viraraghavan

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Rose breeders are indeed dreamers, a fact recognized by that doyen of American rose breeders, H.C. Swim. As you know, Swim's roses regularly won the All American Rose Selections in the heyday of the Hybrid Teas. Pragmatic as he was, Swim titled his book on rose breeding 'Roses – From Dreams to Reality'.

Striking a personal note, I have always been fascinated by roses which are different. India's well known rose breeder, Dr. B.P. Pal, has written about me, half in jest, that while other hybridizers preferred a safer 'bird in hand' policy, I appeared to have agreed with Bret Harte, who wrote 'a bird in hand is a certainty, but a bird in the bush may sing!'. But don't be afraid, I am not going to sing about my roses but merely narrate where my dreams of roses have led me so far.

I began rose breeding in the early 1960's with the inspiration provided by Mr. B.S. Bhattacharji who emphasized the need to have a separate line of breeding for warm climates. In other words, produce sustainable roses. So however eccentric the choice of objective the roses which emerged had to be easy to grow.

From the outset the emphasis was on roses which are not martyrs to fungus problems requiring spraying with modern fungicides, many of which are environmentally hazardous. The seedlings raised under my programme are sprayed only with a mixture of potassium bicarbonate and neem oil, to control disease, adapting the pioneering work done in the Montreal Botanic Garden. Even this environment friendly spray schedule is not rigidly followed, but only occasional sprays given depending on weather conditions.

Inspired by Mr. Bhattacharji, one of my earliest dreams was to produce Tea roses in brighter colors. Several crosses were made with the yellow Tea, 'Etoile de Lyon', and an unknown pink Tea, crossing them into modern Hybrid Teas, and one, the pink Tea x 'Samba', produced my first rose, named, rather aptly I feel, 'First Offering', a bushy plant with lovely red flowers of the Tea rose persuasion, but sadly now lost. I remember two other seedlings, a dazzling yellow variety from the pink Tea into the Le Grice floribunda, 'Gold Gleam', and a salmon from 'Etoile de Lyon' x 'Mischief' – these too were lost when I wakened from rose reveries to the realities of career in Government service, which entail constant transfers from one place to another.

Somewhat later started an obsession, I must confess with the so-called 'hand-painted' roses, originated by Sam McGredy. Having been always very fond of bicolor roses, I was captivated by his first hand painted floribunda, 'Picasso', where the colors of red and white are mixed at random. The dream was to produce a Hybrid Tea with the same mix of colors. It so happened that my very first effort resulted in success. 'Picasso' crossed into the red and white 'Inge Horstmann' produced 'Priyatama', named for Girija. "Priyatama" means "most beloved" in Sanskrit.

Many other hand-painted roses followed like 'Bodhisattva' ('Magic East') and 'Blushing Yuki'.

I have been attracted to roses in unusual colors, so it comes as no surprise that my attention was drawn to what are optimistically called 'blue roses'. Working with the heritage Geschwind rose, 'Gruss an Teplitz', which does well in India, brought 'Vanamali', which grows in the Sakura garden. Many others followed including some in the closely related brownish colors, like 'Coffee Country'.

The great rose breeder, Edward Le Grice was an inspiration and his roses, 'Lilac Charm', 'Amberlight' and 'Tom Brown', in shades of brown, and 'Ripples', lilac, as well as the incredible purple, 'News', which owes its color to the Gallica, 'Tuscany', became part of my breeding line, which is now focused on the purple shades so loved in India.

Graham Stuart Thomas, that great pioneer behind the heritage rose movement, provided the next dream. He had observed, talking of Noisette roses, that if these roses could be created again, and given more color, they would take the world by storm - remarks which apply equally to the Teas and Chinas. Wilhelm Kordes of 'Crimson Glory' fame once remarked that the soup ladle can only bring out what is in the soup tureen, stressing the need for fresh genetic input in rose breeding. And a third hint came from E.F. Allen, Scientific Adviser to the R.N.R.S., U.K., who dwelt, in

the International Rose Conference in 1976, on the possibilities of raising new roses for warm climates using *R. clinophylla*, the world's only tropical rose species.

If this mix was not complicated enough, I added a vision of incorporating the beauty of the other parent of the Teas, *R. gigantea*, into the breeding line. The most beautiful of the *Rosa gigantea*s is the clone which grows in India's north east, with flowers yellower and larger than the others from outside India.

Success with *R. clinophylla* was difficult indeed, as it is generally very far removed from even the Tea/Noisette roses, not to speak of modern roses. But ultimately two interesting seedlings emerged – a pink repeat flowering single rose from the pink Tea, 'Mrs B.R. Cant', and a larger flowered pale orange and tallow bicolor from the cross of the floribunda, 'Little Darling' into a seedling of mine derived from *R. clinophylla* pollinated by the closely related *R. bracteata*. The latter was probably of higher chromosome number unlike the 'Mrs. B. R. Cant' seedling which was probably diploid. These two seedlings are in the background of my new range of Hybrid Clinophyllas.

The diploid range received an unexpected boost when crosses were made with the Noisette climber, 'Rêve d'Or', which does well in India. For some unaccounted reason, the seedlings were all very dwarf but quite bushy and I nicknamed them after a leading Indian politician who was so short that some wag referred to him as being below sea level!.

This series of short seedlings is now being crossed into other Teas to produce the compact new Teas, which I propose to call 'Patio Teas'.

From the other seedling of *clinophylla* with 'Little Darling' has come a range of shrub roses culminating in the varieties 'Silver Dawn', 'Ganges Mist' and most recently, the very fragrant 'Pat Henry' named for my good friend who encouraged me by releasing these new roses in the USA. This same rose is called 'Narender' in India, named for the enthusiast who collected the clone of *R. clinophylla* species used in my program. Interestingly, many of the seedlings in this line are very fragrant.

Work with *R. gigantea* was not neglected though it started a little later because Girija and I had to personally collect the species from the wilds of North east India, very near the border with Burma (Myanmar). This was 1990 and the first flower appeared in 1994 after which the program was started. *R. gigantea* was easier to work with than *R. clinophylla*, as its genes figure though somewhat distantly even in modern roses.

Two lines appeared – a diploid line from crosses of the species with 'Rêve d'Or, and a tetraploid line from crosses with the French Hybrid Tea, 'Carmosine'.

In the search for new roses with *R. gigantea* an unexpected bonus was the appearance of several Tea roses where the close proximity of the *R. gigantea* genes in the parentage resulted in plants with better foliage and petal texture. In this part of the work a seedling of *R. gigantea* into the polyantha 'Echo' has been very useful as the polyantha genes paved the way for freedom of flowering.

One of the great connoisseurs of roses, once remarked that, as the rose mania intensifies, the rosarian comes to understand that there is nothing as beautiful as the single rose. My new lines have resulted in some elegant singles.

Even the connoisseurs of the heritage rose will admit that whatever the problems of plant habit and foliage, the form of the Hybrid Tea is indeed very beautiful. In warm climates the modern Hybrid Tea bred for cold resistance is virtually a failure. Peter Harkness, while tracing the origin of the Hybrid Tea from the genetic point of view, provided the inspiration for a new kind of Hybrid Tea.

Basically the Hybrid Tea is evolved from the cross of Tea roses with Hybrid Perpetuals. Harkness points out that the Hybrid Perpetual has practically no chinensis genes in its genetic makeup, except the gene for repeat flowering.

If we want a better Hybrid Tea for warm climates why not substitute the Hybrid Perpetual with another large flowered rose, where the chinensis genes are more prominent?

Pursuing this dream a new line of Hybrid Teas starting from Alister Clark's 'Lady Mann' was begun.

Apart from heat resistance the emphasis from the beginning in these new lines was on evergreen foliage based on the simple logic that a rose plant, especially in the tropics and subtropics, should look beautiful even when not in bloom, as roses have to compete with the lush foliage of other warm climate plants. The dream was that the new varieties would fill the existing gap in roses suitable for these areas. In addition efforts are on to produce brighter colors by bringing in the genes of 'Fortune's Double Yellow' and some of the brighter colored miniature roses.

The emphasis on beautiful leaves led me, perhaps inevitably, to that extraordinary species, *R. laevigata*, endowed with such striking foliage. Work with this is in progress, with the Japanese hybrid from *R. laevigata*, 'Laevigata rosea'.

Again, inspired by Japan, and the giant trees of , to be found in the mountains, especially near Hakkone and Mt. Fuji, I thought of creating roses as big as cherry trees. This is perfectly possible but the first steps are proving very difficult. I hope however to have something in the not too distant future.,

The last time I gave a talk in Japan, in 2006, I had composed a haiku, as a tribute to our Japanese hosts. The first line runs: 'My dream rose mocks me, 'make me real'. And the punch line speaks of only dream roses being real. I leave you to ponder on this.

Editors note: This is the text of the lecture given in May 2012 at the W.F.R.S Heritage Rose Convention, at Sakura, Japan.

Copies of the original

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'Allegory of Spring' (Carefree Beauty x Evergreen Gene)

M.S. Viraraghavan



'Dr.N.C.Sen'

(Naga Belle x Lady Mann) x Winter Sunset

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